

BARRIO ANITA

RECLAIMING A NEIGHBORHOOD'S PAST AND PRESENT

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On a map, Barrio Anita is a long thin triangle sandwiched between Tucson's Interstate 10 and Union Pacific rail line. In the past two decades, it has "hosted" a number of arts-based neighborhood history projects, some more successful than others at creating pride and cohesion—and in recent years, a prevailing sense of having been overlooked by the City had returned. Then, for two nights in April 2018, the neighborhood's history and stories were projected, large on screens and buildings in a public event called "Barrio Stories/Barrio Anita."

The event was a collaborative effort by Borderlands Theater company and the Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) team, comprised of neighborhood residents and the director of Oury Park Recreation Center, under the City of Tucson's Parks and Recreation Department. Drawing hundreds to the streets for food, music, oral histories, and shadow puppetry, the event helped not only to tell the history of the neighborhood, but also to reanimate a neighborhood that had, by many accounts, forgotten the power of its own voice.

Funded in year one of CCI, the Barrio Stories production gave the neighborhood a tangible way to see and celebrate itself, said Marc Pinate, CCI team leader and director of Borderlands Theater. The project capitalized on that pride in year two to inspire a renewed community engagement, "to get to a place where, like in the past, neighbors had trust in each other, knew each other, back each other up, helped each other out. And through that, address some of the issues affecting the neighborhood," he said.

The project galvanized a new wave of community participation. "[Barrio Stories] kind of got the ball rolling as far as community involvement—people willing to be involved and get out there," said Miguel Garcia, CCI team member and director of Oury Park Recreation Center (OPRC).

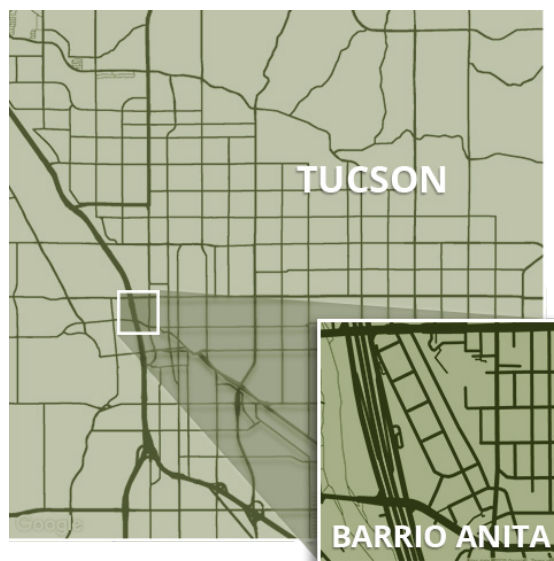


Photo: Los Aguilas de Davis Bilingual Magnet School perform at Baile Calavera for Dia de los Muertos, November 2019.

Team member Julian Argote, a neighborhood resident and participating artist, said the project inspired him to not only think differently about the neighborhood but also to actively engage in activities there. “[Before] I was never involved in anything. I was one of those people, I kept to myself. Barrio Stories opened that up and started making [me] remember and made me want more,” he said.

In addition to the Barrio Stories event, the project included smaller events at the OPRC and elsewhere, including art workshops, garden parties, *tarteadas*, and a *Día de los Muertos*-themed dance. These events offered neighbors a time and space to reconnect. “You saw a lot of folks who hadn’t seen each other in years or grew up in the neighborhood. This project actually brought them back to see this wonderful event that got put on,” Garcia said.



But beyond just cause for celebration, these reconconnections helped galvanize the reformation

of the neighborhood association. “People had been talking about electing officers and restarting it, but I think the turnout at the elections—about 80 people that voted—was probably higher than it might have been,” Pinate said.

Argote, who had no intention of joining the neighborhood association, was elected as its secretary. “If it wasn’t for this project, I probably would still be at home not knowing what’s going on in the neighborhood, honestly,” he said.

Garcia said the shift in neighborhood involvement has been particularly noticeable at the park. When he first started working at OPRC, he would see people stepping over trash instead of picking it up. “That one phrase pops into my head: without unity, there is no community. That’s really what I have seen over the last couple years. A lot of people caring about their community again. It’s really, really a drastic change,” he said.

But it wasn’t just improved relationships among neighbors. The neighborhood was able to strengthen its relationship with Ward 1, the City Council office that represents it. “I felt like those relationships weren’t there before. And now they are there, and they support us in many, many ways throughout this neighborhood now—in ways that I felt growing up here and living here most of my life I never saw. Now it’s like we get all this help that wasn’t there before,” Argote said.

The neighborhood was able to leverage cultural events to draw more attention from city officials to address neighborhood deficits, Pinate said.

For instance, a four-way stop sign was put up at an intersection.

A neighborhood swimming pool, Oury Park pool, which had been closed for over a decade, re-opened. “It couldn’t have been done without any of those connections, relationships, any of that, those discussions,” Argote said.

A ride-along with Tucson Police Department and staff from Tucson City Council’s Ward 1 Office let neighborhood residents share concerns, which led to increased neighborhood patrols, resulting in tapered down drug activity.

Argote himself took an active role in making the park safer for children and families. When he grew up in the neighborhood, the park was often filled with transients or people using or selling drugs. “I wanted to see my kids grow up not thinking what I thought was normal is normal. You know, all that has to change. So, it’s changed a lot, to where this park’s filled every night with kids,” he said.

Team members say focusing on people's stories was key to bringing people together, something they noticed with neighborhood participants and with their team itself. "People share their stories and a lot of times it's easier to get together with people if you kind of know where they're coming from and you kind of know a little bit about them because when you feel a little bit more open to share with them," Garcia said.

Pinate said similar connections happened for CCI team members during the training sessions in Phoenix. Steve Arnquist, a political aide in Ward 1, joined the team for one trip, and Pinate spent time with him in the evening after the sessions. "Because of that face time, we got to know each other as just two people that have a common goal. I think, you know, we both feel [that] each other are nice people, nice guys. It's easy to talk to each other," he said.

Later, Pinate asked Arnquist to put on a workshop about canvassing, which he did, and also joined the canvassing effort. "He went door to door, face to face, and met people," Pinate said. "He said that before the project, he didn't know anybody in Barrio Anita. But now he knows several people. He knows them by face, he knows their story. When you know their face, their story, [you're] so much more likely to spend the extra time to try to do something."

Garcia and Argote got to know each other during the Phoenix training as well, which led to Argote being commissioned to paint murals at Oury Center as well as helping Garcia draw more neighborhood involvement. "Phoenix kind of got us away from all our hustle bustle here, so we had the time to actually talk and get to know each other. That created a connection. I mean, with Julián, now I hit him up for any project possible," Garcia said.

But the process was not without its challenges. For Garcia, working for City of Tucson Parks and Recreation, getting "upper management" to support the project was sometimes difficult.



Musical Trio performing boleros at Barrio Stories in Barrio Anita, 2018. Photo by Suzanne Smith.

Barrio Anita residents and Borderlands Theater staff outside Our Neighborhood Center, February 2019.
Photo by Luis Juárez



"If it's not the norm or what we used to do, then it's kind of like, 'Ooh scary,' you know? It was a lot of educating and a lot of like pulling teeth to get things done, which is sad. But that started a whole other conversation, which was good," Garcia said.

Garcia's willingness to keep the conversation going is emblematic of the team's work in Barrio Anita. Pinate says one of the biggest lessons he learned on the project was "keep going." Though early activities drew few participants—and one artist even left the project—the team kept going.

Pinate attributes much of the project's success to that perseverance, but also to the power of stories. When people saw themselves in the Barrio Stories production—projected onto screens and buildings—they felt seen, Pinate said. "People would stop and say, Oh that's my tío or that's my tata.' Hearing the stories, seeing the faces—it was an acknowledgement. When it's done in such a big way, it makes it important. I think people feel like, 'Oh, I'm important or my family was important. My story is important.'"

The process revealed family, community, and history as the pillars of Barrio Anita. And art gave the community a new lens through which to see itself and its assets. "The art was able to highlight the values of this neighborhood that go back 100 years—those values of family, of community. Even when you have problems ... those values are super important, and the art was able to show that," Pinate said.

Pinate said the project also affirmed the presence of assets within the community. "What I didn't expect was that the project more so allowed us to tap into what we already had within us or what we had within the community. It wasn't so much about these outside experts going to teach you how to change everything. It was, let's create space to take stock of what our assets are and what we already have and build relationships that will allow us to make things happen."